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OBSERVATIONS
ON A
PROPOSAL
FOR FORMING A SOCIETY
FOR PROMOTING THE
CIVILIZATION AND IMPROVEMENT
OF THE
NORTH-AMERICAN INDIANS
WITHIN THE
BRITISH BOUNDARY.

by the Earl of Selkirk. —

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OBSERVATIONS

ON A

“ PROPOSAL

FOR FORMING A SOCIETY

*For promoting the Civilization and Improvement of the North-American Indians within the British Boundary *.*”

THE object of the proposed Society is so laudable, that there can scarcely be a doubt of its meeting with the support it deserves, from a nation so distinguished for liberality as Great Britain. The example shown by the Americans is calculated both to rouse our emulation and to direct our efforts.

The authors of the Proposal refer to a very interesting narrative, published in America and reprinted in

* Published by Hatchard, Piccadilly.

this country, under the title of “Accounts of two Attempts towards the Civilization of some Indian Natives.” The persons engaged in the undertakings there related, the Quakers of Philadelphia and Baltimore, have indeed conducted themselves with great judgment, and have obtained a corresponding degree of success. But the civilization of the Indians within the British boundary, is a task of still greater difficulty.

The different tribes to whom the Quakers have extended their attention, and of whose progress they have given so pleasing an account, were all previously, more or less, in the habit of cultivating the ground. They have for ages been accustomed to live in fixed habitations, and have generally

raised so much Indian corn, that the subsistence of their families seldom depended on the produce of the chase. Hitherto, indeed, their agricultural labour has been chiefly done by the women, and a great step has been accomplished by the Quakers in persuading the *men* to work. This step, however, is not so difficult as that which is to be taken by the Northern Indians of Canada, who are totally unaccustomed to the cultivation of the ground, who subsist entirely by hunting and fishing, and who are consequently in the habit of roaming about with their whole families, and have no other habitations than portable *wigwams*.

There is an exception to this in the Five Nations on the Grand River,

who are of the same race with the Indians, of whom the Philadelphia Committee give an account, and who, like them, have long been accustomed to a certain degree of cultivation. These Indians are, however, but few in number. The great bulk of the Indians within the British boundary are of the Chippewa nation, called by the French Algonquins, who differ totally from the Five Nations in language and manners. There is, besides, such a rooted antipathy between these two races of Indians, that the civilization of the one could be of no use as a step towards that of the others. Except those of the Grand River, the only other Indians in Upper Canada who carry on any cultivation,

are a few of the Ottawa nation, situated not far from Detroit. Their industry is still very inferior to that of the Five Nations ; but as they are of the same race as the Northern Indians, and speak nearly the same language, some use may perhaps be made of their progress.

In any attempt to civilize the Indians in Canada, the principal difficulty will be found to arise from the Fur Trade. It is with perfect justice that the Edinburgh Reviewers have characterized that trade as a “bounty upon barbarism.” It holds out a constant encouragement to hunting, which serves to divert the Indians from any more industrious pursuit. The first faint attempts at improvement are thus continually

nipped in the bud : and it is not too much to say, that the Fur Trade has contributed to keep up and strengthen the savage habits of the American Indians, as much as the Slave Trade has those of the African Negroes.

This trade is also the chief cause of the melancholy diminution in the population of the Indian tribes. The eager demand for furs, and the high prices given by the Europeans, have encouraged the Indians to kill the game, whether wanted for food or not. The consequence is, that the game is now much worn out, and that the country has become incapable of maintaining by hunting even the same number of inhabitants which it formerly did. This growing scarcity of their accustomed

means of subsistence, could only have been remedied by attention to cultivation: but to this there has not been the least advance. Famine has consequently reduced the numbers of all these tribes; and being now more thinly scattered over the country, they are still more unsocial, and more difficult to be reclaimed from a wandering life, than formerly.

These evils are aggravated, to a deplorable degree, by the facility of intoxication, which the Europeans afford to the Indians. The fur traders are scattered over the whole country, every where striving against one another to obtain customers, and all obliged to exert their utmost dexterity, to recommend themselves to the good will of the

Indians. Nothing is found so effectual to this purpose, as a liberal distribution of rum or whisky.

The shocking effects produced among the Indians by the excessive use of spirituous liquors, have been forcibly described by almost every writer, who has had a personal knowledge of the facts. The more intelligent of the Indians themselves are sensible that these excesses are the most dreadful scourge of their race. The Report of the Baltimore Committee repeats the energetic observations of an Indian chief, who asserts that his nation had lost more men in the course of a few years of peace, through the effects of intoxication, than it had by the arms of the enemy during a long contest

with the American colonists. From the same Report it appears, that this cause had put a stop to all improvement, and that no progress was made by the Quaker missionaries among the Western Indians, till the importation of spirits among them was prohibited by the Americans.

This prohibition could not, perhaps, have been carried into effect, if the American Government had not at the same time established a restriction on the numbers of traders, allowing none to trade without a license, and allotting to them different stations, so that they should not come every where into competition with one another. This circumstance is not noticed in the Baltimore Report, but the writer of these

pages had an opportunity of learning the fact on the spot.

The regulation is a very wise one, but there are obstacles to its adoption in Canada, which were not experienced by the American Government. The real citizens of the United States carry on but little traffic with the Indians; this business is almost entirely in the hands of British subjects, who go from Canada to trade within the American boundary. These men being looked upon with jealousy by the Americans of all ranks, their Government had no scruple in imposing burthens and restrictions upon them. But perhaps that could not so easily be done in the British provinces, where the fur traders are a numerous and wealthy body of men,

possessed of considerable weight and influence.

Some regulation of this kind is, however, indispensable, if ever the Indians are to be reclaimed. It is, indeed, still more important in Canada than among the Indians within the American boundary ; for among the latter, and all the tribes who are accustomed to the cultivation of land, many individuals may be found, who have some degree of moderation in the use of liquor : but among the Chippewas, and other hunting nations of the North, there seems to be (with very few exceptions) a total want of self-command in that respect. Among people of this kind it is in vain to think of checking the pernicious sale of spirituous liquors, while their trade is open with-

out restriction to every adventurer. While one trader supplies the Indians with liquor, his competitors must do the same, or be content to lose all their customers. If, then, a restriction were to be put by law on the sale of spirits, it would certainly be evaded; for any one trader, who should smuggle, would derive so great an advantage over those who might be inclined to obey the law, that some would undoubtedly make the experiment; and, from the nature of the country, it is so entirely impracticable to oppose any effectual obstacle to smuggling, that the other traders would soon follow the example.

These circumstances seem to place an invincible impediment to the civilization of the Indians, unless the

difficulty can be obviated by the following plan, by which that object may be made to coincide with the interest of the traders.

A boundary line must be drawn between the Indians and the Whites. That part of Canada, which has been purchased from the Indians by Government, and laid out for settlements, must be distinguished from the lands still occupied by the original natives. The Indians should be discouraged from resorting to the settled districts ; and on the other hand, the settlers should be prohibited by law from going into the Indian country, without a license from Government.

The country within the Indian boundary should be laid out into districts of considerable extent, each coinciding, as nearly as possible, with the territories of a tribe or nation of the Indians. Each of these districts should be assigned to *one* company of traders, who should have an exclusive privilege of trading there for a certain term of years. In the arrangement of these districts, care should be taken to allot some share to every trader, who is at present engaged in the business. All murmurs may thus be obviated, and the trade be rendered far more lucrative to the persons engaged in it, than it now is.

The traders, then, having no longer any competition to fear, will

have no temptation to encourage the intoxication of the Indians. They will also, from the same circumstance, be enabled to purchase the furs at a lower rate ; and this monopoly, so far from being contrary to the interests of the Indians, will be much for their advantage. Nothing indeed would be so much for their real advantage, as to be cut off from all trade whatever with the Whites. Under the proposed plan, the demand for furs will still continue ; but instead of a keen and violent competition, it will become a regular and moderate demand, still affording them a market for the produce of the chase, but allowing them time to attend to other objects, and to improve in cultivation.

It is probable, indeed, (however paradoxical it may appear,) that this diminution in the competition for furs, will tend to increase the quantity brought to market: for each company of traders, having a permanent interest in the district which is assigned to them, will attend to the preservation of the race of wild animals, and dissuade the Indians from killing them at improper seasons, or destroying the young brood. At present they pay little or no attention to this, but, by purchasing every fur that is offered to them, encourage an indiscriminate destruction. If some pains were taken to preserve the breed, the Indians might obtain a greater quantity of furs with a lesser sacrifice of their time.

If this plan should be objected to, as inconsistent with the general principles of freedom of commerce, the plea would be very groundless. Dr. Adam Smith, and the other writers on Political Economy, who have established these general principles in so satisfactory a manner, have drawn all their arguments from the nature of *trades of production* : but the Fur Trade is a trade of *destruction*, and cannot be judged of on the same principles. A limitation on the Fur Trade is no more inconsistent with the freedom of commerce than the abolition of the Slave Trade.

The limitation of competition under the proposed plan would undoubtedly increase the profits of the traders, so much that they could

easily afford to pay a small rent to Government for each district ; and out of this a fund might be created for defraying the expense of establishments, for the civilization of the Indians. The traders themselves might be made to assist in the endeavours for this purpose. They are now obliged in many cases to live as wandering a life as the Indians themselves, and to follow them in all their ramblings, lest some competitor should step in and carry away their customers. But if that fear were removed, they would be much more inclined to settle in fixed posts, and to wait there for the Indians to come to them. These trading posts might be rendered schools of industry to the Indians.

The traders must employ a number of servants, for carrying their goods into the Indian country, and bringing back the furs. During a great part of the year these servants are almost idle; but if they remained stationary at fixed posts, they might be employed with advantage to their masters in clearing and cultivating land. At present the servants employed by the traders are a vicious and dissipated set of men. Indeed no others would be fit for the wild and vagabond life to which they must be subject, as long as the trade continues on its present footing. If by the exclusion of competition the trading establishments became more fixed, men of a more sober and steady disposition might

be employed in them, and might be made use of at the same time to instruct the natives in the useful arts.

If the Governor of the province took an interest in the object, he could have many opportunities of promoting it with little trouble; and perhaps a few small premiums distributed to the traders and their servants, in proportion to the progress of the Indians under the care of each company, would contribute more effectually to the object in view, than the most expensive establishments that could be formed, would without such assistance.

We are not to expect that with the utmost diligence the progress of the Chippewa nations can soon form a parallel, to that which is described

in the American narratives. The experience of all nations has proved, that the first steps in the progress of civilization are the most difficult: and these northern tribes are at present in so low a state of barbarism, that it will be a work of time and labour to bring them even to that stage of advancement, at which the American missionaries found the Oneydas and the Miamees. There cannot, however, be a doubt, that by a perseverance in the same benevolent plan, the same results will in the end be obtained, provided the essential obstacles be first removed. Till, however, a foundation be laid, by some regulations as to the Fur Trade, such measures as those of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Societies

would be utterly unavailing, and any attempt to follow their example quite hopeless.

As an indispensable preliminary, therefore, to the efforts of the proposed Society, it seems to be necessary that the Legislature should be applied to, for an Act to authorize the Governor of Canada, to fix by proclamation the limits of the country reserved for the use of the Indian natives, and to prohibit any of His Majesty's subjects from trading within these limits without a special license.

THE END.



